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How do librarians in schools support struggling readers?

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ABSTRACT

While librarians in schools often face significant budgetary cuts, they can play an important role in supporting learning in literacy and literature. However, little is known about the practices that they may employ to this end. Of particular interest is the role of librarians in schools in supporting struggling readers, as these students may be increasingly disadvantaged as they move through the years of schooling. Semi-structured interview data were collected from teacher librarians at 30 schools and analysed to identify practices exercised by teacher librarians that aligned with extant research around supporting struggling readers. Teacher librarians provided support by identifying struggling readers, providing them with age and skill-appropriate materials, undertaking skill scaffolding supporting choice, supporting students with special needs, providing one-to-one matching, promoting access to books, enhancing the social position of books and reading, reading aloud to students, facilitating silent reading, and preparing students for high-stakes literacy testing.

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Introduction

Improving the literacy outcomes of young people is a key focus of contemporary education (Greenwood, Creaser, and Maynard 2010). Uncovering how librarians in schools can support struggling readers to improve their literacy, in relation to their reading skills and attitudes, is the purpose of this paper. Classroom teachers are not the only literacy educators in schools; while librarians in schools often face significant staffing and budgetary cuts, research supports the contention that they can play an important role in supporting learning in literacy and literature.

Research suggests that the presence of libraries and qualified librarians in schools can exert a positive effect on young people's literacy learning, with the promotion of reading attitudes and frequency part of the core role of the librarian in schools (Bailey, Hall, and Gamble 2007). In addition, students typically achieve stronger standardised test scores in schools with strong library programmes, with "the most substantial and consistent finding" across a wealth of US research studies indicating "a positive relationship between full-time, qualified school librarians and scores on standards-based language arts, reading and writing tests, regardless of student demographics and school characteristics" (Lance and Kachel 2018, 16). The loss of librarians has been associated with a negative influence on students' academic achievement

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(Dow, Lakin & Court 2012). Schools with qualified librarians typically achieve higher scores in English (Small, Shanahan, and Stasak 2010), and greater library staffing is associated with better results on high-stakes testing (Softlink 2016b). UK findings suggest that in “effective” primary and secondary schools “libraries and well trained specialist librarians had a positive impact on teaching and learning”, and that “librarians were involved directly in programmes to support reading including the promotion of reading groups” (Ofsted 2006, 2). Librarians in schools in the UK may also play a pivotal role in literacy interventions for struggling readers (e.g. Gorard, Siddiqui, and See 2015). Scotland recently launched a national strategy for school libraries, which recognises that “professionally trained librarians and information experts can provide children and young people with the transferable skills required to achieve throughout life and develop a lifelong love of reading” (The Scottish Government 2018, 7).

The precise nature of the practices employed by librarians in schools that confer this beneficial effect on literacy attainment are not understood, and, in order to be able to quantify the benefit of these practices, the practices must first be identified. It is important that this gap be addressed in a timely manner, as the position of school libraries in the UK, the US and Australia is highly vulnerable in recent times, with libraries enduring a destabilising effect from funding cuts (Burns 2016; Kachel 2015; Softlink 2016a). This has led to calls for regulatory bodies such as Ofsted to “pay particular attention to ways in which the library can be seen to be contributing to standards in English, especially in terms of pupils’ reading habits and skills” (Shenton 2007, 110). As such, while the value of librarians in schools has some traction, the profession is still vulnerable, and more must be known about the contribution that librarians in schools may make to English in education.

Librarians in schools in the UK and the US are expected to make a significant educational contribution in their schools (American Association of School Libraries (AASL) 2017; School Library Association 2016). Australia has highly qualified librarians in its schools, as Australia’s school librarians are typically “teacher librarians”, fully trained and qualified as both educators and librarians (Australian School Library Association (ASLA) 2018; Ryan 2018). Despite the fact that Australian teacher librarians hold this mandatory dual qualification, their educational role may be poorly understood by their teacher colleagues, school leadership and administration (Merga *in press-b*).

The students most in need of literacy support are struggling readers, who are typically low achievers with poor engagement in literacy learning (Guthrie and Davis 2003). Their lack of motivation to read subsequently limits their engagement in reading, and therefore diminishes “opportunities to build vocabulary, improve comprehension and develop effective reading strategies” (Roberts, Torgesen, Boardman & Scammacca 2008, 67). As such, struggling readers have their disadvantage compounded by a Matthew Effect: capable students who read frequently get “richer” through continued exposure to reading, which confers skill benefit, and the gap between them and struggling readers widens (Stanovich 2009). Spichtig et al. (2017) describe how the poor independent reading skills of struggling readers pose a challenge for reading comprehension.

When reading is this slow and arduous, it is likely to be difficult for the reader to sustain the level of attention that close reading requires. Moreover, students who read this slowly are likely to be devoting a considerable portion of their cognitive resources to decoding and sounding out words or trying to figure out what words mean, and will therefore find it difficult to focus on the broader meaning of what they are reading. (12)

The cognitive and attentional challenges facing struggling readers are significant, and, as young people move through the years of schooling and exposed to texts of increasing complexity, struggling readers can fall further behind. As such, it can be contended that the most important literacy-supportive practices used by teacher librarians are those that meet the needs of struggling readers. This role may include providing the individualised support that these students can benefit from. In addition, “less skilled readers and the less skilled selectors need successful access, selection, and reading experiences” (Mohr 2006, 85), and teacher librarians can play a key role in facilitating these.

The aim of this paper is to make visible recurring practices employed by teacher librarians at 30 schools in Western Australia, and to critically identify their potential to contribute to struggling readers’ improvement in reading skills and associated literacy and literature learning. While “statistical-probability generalisation is neither applicable to qualitative research nor a goal of it” (Smith 2018, 139), this research can form the basis for further quantitative investigation to determine the impact of these practices on learning, as well as to determine if these practices hold broader generalisability beyond the context in which they were gleaned. As such, this paper makes a valuable contribution to a contentious area that can shape the English outcomes of contemporary students. Herein, I detail the methods employed, before interweaving the results and discussion so that key findings can be introduced alongside the research and consideration of their implications. In light of the aforementioned vulnerability of their profession to staffing cuts, the respondents’ voices and views are foregrounded in this paper, allowing their unique perspectives primacy not often afforded to these beleaguered educators.

Method

After ethics approvals from the University, The Department of Education, and Catholic Education Western Australia, data were collected from 30 teacher librarians at 30 schools as part of the *Teacher Librarians as Australian Literature Advocates in Schools (TLALAS)* project. The interview schedule was carefully piloted prior to implementation to ensure its fitness for purpose. The project explored a number of diverse research questions through collection of qualitative data following a semi-structured interview schedule. This paper reports on the data collected in relation to teacher librarians’ self-report of the practices that they employ to foster literacy and literature learning as part of their professional practice. Data were collected from the 29th of March to the 26th of June, 2018. I then transcribed the data and undertook analysis as I describe herein. Interviews typically ran for around an hour. Respondent characteristics are outlined in Table 1. Participating school characteristics are detailed in Table 2.

Western Australian compulsory schooling years span primary school (Pre-primary (PP) to Year 6, age 5–11) and high school (Years 7–12, age 12–18), with some variation in age ranges encompassed (Department of Education n.d.). While librarians at 16 combined primary and secondary schools took part, most of these librarians worked primarily in the secondary school library. Over 83% ($n = 25$) of the 30 study respondents worked with students in secondary, whole school (kindergarten to Year 12) and combined school/community libraries.

Table 1. Respondent characteristics.

Characteristic	In sample (n = 30)	In sample (%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	28	93.3
Male	2	6.7
Other	0	0
<i>Age Group</i>		
20–29	0	0
30–39	0	0
40–49	7	23.3
50–59	13	43.3
60–69	10	33.3
<i>Years of experience as a teacher librarian</i>		
0–9	11	36.7
10–19	12	40
20–29	5	16.7
30–39	2	6.7

Merga (press-b).

Table 2. School characteristics.

Characteristic	In sample (n = 30)	In sample (%)
<i>Years catered to</i>		
Primary	1	
Secondary	13	
Whole school (includes primary and secondary)*	16	
<i>Enrollment gender</i>		
Co-educations	25	
Girls only	2	
Boys only	3	
<i>Location**</i>		
Metropolitan	23	
Rural	7	
<i>School fee type</i>		
Government (public)	14	
Private	16	
<i>Number of students</i>		
300–599	2	
600–899	8	
900–1199	6	
1200–1499	6	
1500–1799	4	
>1800	4	
<i>ICSEA value of school</i>		
900–999	5	
1000–1099	13	
1100–1199	12	

*Libraries were not always whole school, sometimes separated into junior and senior libraries.

**Based on location of library visited (Merga in press-b).

Participant identities were protected through use of pseudonyms and all efforts were taken to prevent identification of participants via deductive disclosure (Kaiser 2009). As such, the volume of explanatory detail that can be furnished around participants is necessarily limited. Pseudonyms were selected by the participants, with their direct quotes presented in lightly edited verbatim form to facilitate readability while maintaining the original meaning and intent of the respondents. This paper reports on in-depth responses to interview questions seeking to determine the specific practices that teacher

librarians employ to support their students' literature and literacy learning, with a focus on analysis of the practices that meet the needs of struggling readers.

After the interview data were transcribed, a cross-case analysis was employed using an inductive approach, which involved close reading of the data to derive key recurrent practices rather than themes (Thomas 2006). I allowed the practices to emerge from the data; however, I also drew on my research background to bring a suite of "sensitising concepts" which provided guidance into how to identify which practices could be viewed as supportive of literacy and literature learning (Patton 1990, 391). Sensitising concepts can be defined as constructs "derived from the research participants' perspective, using their language or expressions, and that sensitise the researcher to possible lines of inquiry" (Given 2008, 813). I identified practices which reflected the sensitising concepts and my broader understanding of literacy and literature education. For inclusion, these practices needed to appear at least twice across the 30 school and librarian sample to avoid inclusion of practices that were only used as an individual anomaly. At 40 supportive practices, the scope of these contributions was considerable, and too large to be illustrated and critically explored comprehensively in a journal article. It should also be noted that the list is unlikely to be exhaustive, as participating teacher librarians were given little time in which to formulate a response in a semi-structured interview scenario. It does not include the wealth of additional activities undertaken by teacher librarians in the course of their role, which are not directly related to supporting children's literature and literacy learning.

I then analysed the 40 practices, applying sensitising concepts specific to improving the engagement and/or learning outcomes for struggling readers, and looking for overlap where strategies that had been coded into other areas could sit under strategies to identify and support struggling readers. Use of these sensitising concepts was essential, as the educative benefits of some strategies in relation to the needs of struggling and disengaged readers might escape the critical lens of inquiry without capacity to draw upon the extant research. For example, the educative benefits of provision of access to books might be underestimated without the knowledge that access to books is positively associated with reading motivation, which is related to literacy benefits (Gambrell 1996). While all of the 40 practices can benefit struggling readers, this paper reports on 10 practices that readily aligned with meeting the needs of this at-risk group, as explored below.

Results and discussion

Identifying struggling readers

While high stakes standardised testing can have a detrimental impact on teaching quality (Polesel, Rice, and Dulfer 2014) and young people's conceptualisation of the purposes of reading (Merga 2016b), monitoring these data is one way that teachers can identify struggling readers (Valencia and Buly 2004). However, teacher librarians may also identify potentially struggling readers through collecting data on student performance in library-based reading programmes. Ingrid described how her school's library programme had an important diagnostic role, explaining that the intent of the programme was

...for us to have a little bit more data about the students' reading. To be able to follow up, especially when you're seeing, you know, 30 students once every two weeks. To provide the

teachers with information ... because they get a lot of data from other areas as well. So, it was just a little bit of an additional one and it made the library part of their program (and) more valued, I think.

Teacher librarians also reported monitoring borrowing data, which could also alert them to periods of student disengagement, with Veronica explaining that “I monitor how they’re borrowing, what they’re borrowing, keeping an eye on those kids who drop off a bit”. Student engagement in reading does not remain static over time; children may read less as they move through the years of schooling as typical textual complexity increases, attitudes toward reading change, and opportunities and access to reading time and materials alter, amongst other factors (Merga [in press-a](#)). As such, ongoing identification of changes in student reading skills and borrowing levels can be important indicators that stimulate supportive intervention.

Providing age and skill-appropriate materials for struggling readers

As contended by Moore et al. (1999), “all adolescents, and especially those who struggle with reading, deserve opportunities to select age-appropriate materials they can manage and topics and genres they prefer” (102). Grace talked about increasing numbers of struggling readers moving through her rural high school, and how this influenced her collection building.

And we’re also finding we’re getting increasing low literacy. We have a very big group of kids, in this year particularly, we actually have pre-readers... in year 7. Which goes back to our book selection. I have a “quick read” section which you might have seen ... deliberately finding the low literacy level, (but) high interest, but even those, for this particular group of kids, are too hard.

Grace met this challenge of increasing numbers of students entering high school at pre-reading level by liaising with a local bookstore to source easier books with “secondary topics, but written at not quite pre-reader ... almost ... at the year 1 level, so they’re actually getting the content at the right reading level.” Similarly, Laura explained that

I have lots and lots and lots and lots of skinny little books, so they’re not challenged by the reading. And those books, in particular, are quite useful for dyslexic students, and EAL/D students, because they’re double spaced, so it’s easier for them to read.

This resourcing role to support struggling readers, including those for whom English is an additional language or dialect (EAL/D), is essential to provide them with reading materials featuring age-appropriate content that are not too difficult to engage with.

Undertaking skill scaffolding for supporting choice

Young people can struggle with choosing appealing reading material in both primary school (Merga [2017b](#); Merga & Mat Roni [2017](#)) and secondary school (Merga [2016a](#)), particularly when they are struggling readers with limited experience in reading for pleasure, with scant knowledge of authors and preferred genres to draw upon. Teacher librarians may play a key role in developing students’ skillset for choosing engaging material that is interesting and appropriate. Francesca described how a decline in library staffing had influenced students’ opportunities to learn strategies for choice, explaining

...because we haven't had a library teacher in with them at all this year... and then the previous couple of years it's been a bit hit and miss with what's actually happened with them. We're now realising that the kids don't have the skills. They can't choose an appropriate book, they don't know where to find the book, they're really all over the place, you know, they're just grabbing the first book. So, I'm doing a lot of stuff with them at the moment, and we're going to set it up so that I see each primary class for a little block of four weeks across the term, so that they get those skills again.

Likewise, in secondary school, Penny explained that "my aim is to get books in front of them to help them give skills about choosing". With poor choosing skills identified as a barrier to reading engagement by 39% of adolescent infrequent readers in a previous study (Merga 2014b), equipping students to be autonomous selectors of appropriate and engaging materials is an important role.

Supporting students with special needs and readers at risk

Students with special needs that impact upon their reading performance may need additional support and teaching adjustments made for them, and "not all children respond well to even the most effective interventions" (McMaster et al. 2005). Research suggests that "comprehension practices that engage students in thinking about text, learning from text, and discussing what they know are likely to be associated with improved comprehension outcomes for students with reading difficulties and disabilities" (Edmonds et al. 2009, 13). Teacher librarians may provide additional support for these students. For example, Hannah was a teacher librarian with experience in Special Education who also happened to be dyslexic. She described drawing on her expertise to make visible techniques of self-correction that she employed as she read. She explained that she worked with "a young boy who is dyslexic, and I was reading to him and made a dyslexic error, and went back and explained what I'd done and he said, 'Yeah, I do that, too'". She then connected him with "Paul Jennings' really easy books", which are humorous works, "with about five words per page", and this led to him "now reading an enormous amount. And he's even recommending books for me now". This supportive relationship connected the students with books, and helped him to develop strategies to read more efficiently despite his struggles with dyslexia.

On a broader scale, Dan ran a dyslexic support group in his library, using the group as an opportunity to promote reading engagement with struggling readers, often using high interest texts with substantial graphic elements to support reading, and Maria ran a programme for readers at risk at her all-boys high school.

I run the reading program for the kids at risk. And we have great success; those kids will read 20 books a year. But they have to read five books minimum a term. And some of them are churning them out. I've had some kids who've read 12 books this term. Right, but that's just my reading program. Because what they like is, they like being able to measure their success. Because it's an online thing, you've probably come across the (name of commercial program that allocates student reading levels) before, but the way we do it here, is that the kids will sit their big test, they'll read five books at their level, well, I usually push them to 100 over their level. And then when they've done that, they can sit the big test again and measure whether they've improved. And boys love competing against themselves.

Maria described successfully harnessing the competitive instincts of these students to best their own goals, and use of a commercial programme in an innovative way to enable students to extend their reading skills. She did not confine students to their level, instead encouraging them to exceed it.

Providing one-to-one matching

In addition to providing age and skill-appropriate materials for struggling readers, teacher librarians typically seek to increase reading engagement by consulting with students to match their interests with an appealing book, in order to stimulate reading motivation and increase the likelihood of reading frequency. Children in upper primary school have described the importance of finding engaging books in stimulating greater reading engagement (Merga 2017b), and adolescents have previously described the positive effect of teachers who understand their interests and are able to draw upon this knowledge to connect students with reading material (Merga 2015b). Guthrie and Davis (2003) contend that “when the struggling reader had a text that was appropriately matched to his ability and personal interest his persistence, investment, and use of cognitive skills were remarkable” (65). Where students are exposed to high-interest reading material that is engaging, this may lead to them persisting with material that is challenging, improving their reading skills (Mohr 2006).

Librarians who facilitated this matching, such as Laura, often specifically targeted the reluctant readers in her class to take on the “challenge” of finding them engaging reading material.

I would say a third to a quarter of students in every class are not fussed about reading, and within that there’s a small core group who just hate reading. But, I always say to them, “Give me a challenge, I will find something that I can interest you in reading about”, and I usually do. And they’ll sit down and read it.

Similarly, Ingrid described one of the other teacher librarians in her team, explaining that

...I have a lovely team and I have one very special teacher librarian who the kids adore. She’s quite scatty and all over the place, not a typical librarian, but she absolutely loves reading, and she matches the students to the books very well, and they are numerous occasions when I’ve heard them come to her and say, “Oh, Mrs (name), it was a fantastic book. I want to read the whole series. Where is it?” Or “Yes, it’s brilliant, I want another book like that”, so you know that you are impacting on them. Or those ones who didn’t read and suddenly start reading, that’s fabulous and she does that very well.

Teacher librarians are uniquely situated around a large volume of books, and typically have deep knowledge of a broad range of books, enabling them to make these fortuitous literary matches for struggling readers.

Promoting access to books

As students move through the years of schooling there may be declining access to diverse and interesting texts in the classroom (Guthrie & Davies 2003), as well as limited access to school libraries during class time (Merga and Mat Roni 2017). This can be

a significant impediment to the growth of struggling readers, as access to books is positively related to reading motivation, reading skills, reading frequency and positive attitudes toward reading (Clark and Poulton 2011; Gambrell 1996; Merga 2015a). Teacher librarians may act as advocates to resist the trend toward cessation of time in the library accessing books, with Alicia describing how this has been “a bit of a contentious issue for the last couple of years. I believe that the primary school should be getting a lesson a week, or at least a lesson a fortnight with their students”. Jeanette pushed back against similar challenges, explaining that “time in the library was cut at the beginning of last year”.

One solution that teacher librarians may employ to improve students’ access to books, particularly in the context of diminishing class access to the library, is the implementation of pop-up/mobile libraries, which bring a high-interest selection from the collection out of the library, to the students. Francesca described this approach.

... on a Monday and a Friday lunchtime, usually, we do a pop-up library. We’ve got a trolley out there that we take out into the wilds. And you know, kids will come up and go, “Oh, what have you got, what have you got”, you know, and they’ll take a book, and I’m like, “They’re just library books, like, they’re in the library all the time, you never come to the library”, and they just look at you and go, “Yeah, I’m not going there.” But they’ll take a book.

By making books available outside the library, Francesca and others acted to mitigate the negative effects of limited student access to libraries during class time, and reluctance to visit the library in leisure time.

Enhancing the social position of books and reading

Where young people believe that books are socially acceptable, they are more likely to read for recreation, and to have a positive attitude toward reading (Merga 2014a). As such, enhancing the social positioning of books and reading could potentially engage some struggling readers by increasing their motivation to read. Research also suggests that perceived friends’ attitudes toward reading can influence young people’s attitudes toward reading, and that boys may be more strongly influenced than girls (Merga 2014a). Teacher librarians can employ numerous strategies to foster the positive social positioning of books and reading. For instance, sharing discussion about reading books for pleasure can improve the social status of books and reading, and they may also facilitate the development of reading comprehension in struggling readers, though recent findings suggest that this practice is not often used in contemporary classrooms (Merga, McRae, and Rutherford 2018; Merga 2018). Paloma described her strategy of facilitating peer recommendations through discussion.

In classes, we also get other kids to recommend. So, part of the lesson quite often, once we get the kids in and sit them down, we say, “So, who read what? What did you enjoy? What would you recommend to your friends?” So, we do that sort of thing as well, we do work a lot on other kids recommending books.

While this practice offers the advantage of supporting students’ choices through peer recommendation, it also enables discussion of books in the context of enjoyment. A more formal mechanism for facilitating this discussion is the book club. Books clubs meet students’ social needs while promoting reading engagement (Alvermann et al.

1999; Bryan, Fawson & Ruetzel 2003), and teacher librarians, such as Jeannette provided book clubs for her students, using the opportunity to “try and broaden their reading ... to read books that they wouldn’t recommend each other. So, going a bit broader”.

Reading to students beyond the early years

Reading aloud to young people can confer a range of literacy benefits (Mol and Bus 2011), such as enriching language exposure (Senechal and LeFevre 2002). Recent research provides a strong argument for the importance of reading aloud to struggling adolescent learners, with Westbrook et al. (2018) describing the benefits of reading aloud to struggling readers as even more notable than the benefits of reading to competent readers. In their recent study, teachers read two whole challenging novels to students at a brisk pace, finding that

...poorer readers in both groups (students whose reading age was 12 months or more behind their chronological age) made an average of 16 months progress in the standardised tests compared to the average + readers in both groups who progressed at the average of 9 months – and this was statistically significant. (3)

While teachers may struggle to find time in the crowded curriculum to read aloud to their students even at primary school level (Merga and Ledger 2018), both adolescents (Merga 2015b) and children (Ledger and Merga 2018; Merga 2017a) have described listening to teachers and parents read to them as enjoyable. Teacher librarians such as Libba described the positive atmosphere and enjoyment generated by these opportunities at her all-boys high school.

A few years ago, I started it. I’ll often read to the Year 7s, 8s, and 9s, and I think I actually started with the 9s and I thought, “Oh, this is going to end in disaster.” [Laughs] And the boys just sat there and listened to every word that I said. And I did that with quite a few classes, and one day I said, “Oh, would anyone else like to read?”, and a boy who I thought was just a sporty boy, he read, and he read beautifully, and I discovered he was a really enthusiastic reader, and I didn’t ever ... I knew he was sporty, so that was a judgement I’d made wrong. [Laughs] So to see kids like that, encouraging the rest of the kids to read is beautiful. And the other week, I was reading the start of a book to the boys, and kind of finished at a bit of a cliff-hanger and one of the boys said, “That was beautiful.” [Laughs] And he wasn’t being a Smart Alec. [Laughs]

The positive reception of her reading aloud confounded Libba’s expectations, and gave her confidence to continue to maintain the practice. Similarly, Stephanie read aloud to her students on a fortnightly basis, “so they’ve got access to literature”.

Facilitating silent reading time

Amongst the competing demands for learning in contemporary schools, silent independent reading can fall by the wayside (Merga 2018), particularly as students move through the years of schooling (Merga 2013). For some struggling readers, this is “the only book reading they did” (Merga 2013, 242), which is of concern as time spent reading independently is associated with reading achievement (Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding 1988; Cunningham and Stanovich 1998), as previously explored. This

opportunity to read self-selected materials for enjoyment (Krashen 2004) is highly valuable in the face of significant barriers of intractable time availability and competing recreational pursuits that young people currently experience (Merga 2014b, 2016a). However, teacher librarians may endeavour to enable students to read regularly in an environment conducive to sustained attention, which can support the efforts of struggling readers. Liana described the silent reading practice she established as part of her weekly library classes, which began with a discussion and included the balancing act of teacher modelling and supervision.

So, we have a bit of an intro, we have a bit of a chat, find out what they might have been reading, too. Then they silently read, and I model that. I read while they read. I have to find the right position where I can see in about six different directions and I just stand up and sort of read my book, and the kids are really good at it now...

Teacher librarians can also promote silent reading beyond the library. For example, Penny had successfully instituted silent reading for part of the final period each day in core subjects for students in years 7 and 8.

Preparing students for high stakes literacy testing

Preparation for high-stakes learning strongly influences pedagogy in contemporary schools (e.g. Polesel, Rice, and Dulfer 2014). The most influential of these tests in the Australian context is the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). These tests are “undertaken by students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 simultaneously in all Australian schools annually”, providing “standardised external measurement of reading, writing, language conventions and numeracy” (Swain and Pendergast 2018, 109). NAPLAN is intended to measure individual student performance in relation to “literacy and numeracy benchmarks”, and “the comparative performance of schools and school systems is announced publicly and data for year levels and components of the tests are deeply scrutinised” (109). For struggling readers, such tests often compound their feelings of inadequacy, with some teachers suggesting that NAPLAN “increased stress and pressure, did not enable inclusivity or timely feedback and is an exercise in test-taking rather than a task that promotes authentic learning” (Thompson 2014, 69), and a recurrent teacher perception that “NAPLAN was having negative impacts on curriculum, pedagogy and community relationships” (80) was also apparent in these data. The stress of the experience for struggling students can be linked to the fact that, in some regions, ability to perform well on these tests is linked to high school graduation, such as in Western Australia, where this project was conducted (School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA) 2016). In order to graduate with the Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE), students must achieve Band 8 in the year 9 NAPLAN test. Failing this, they must pass the Online Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (OLNA) (SCSA n.d.).

Teacher librarians can undertake numerous roles in supporting NAPLAN implementation and support, with Dan playing a role in invigilation for these tests, and Diane undertaking to do NAPLAN marking, in order to support her students to higher NAPLAN attainment through a better understanding of the process and the level of students beyond her school.

I think is really important from a literacy point of view ...obviously, I won't be marking our school's papers. But, across the State, what are kids doing? I think you can read any number of examiners' reports, but until you actually get your hands in there and actually see ...what are the kids ... what are they coming out with? Why are there concerns about what kids are doing.... you wouldn't do it every year maybe... but every now and then, just to get your hands in there and go, "Wow, this is where our kids are going wrong, or these are really good examples, this is what I need to do for our kids", so, yeah.

In her school library, Stephanie enabled students to use online testing programmes, which gave "students the necessary practice" to sit the NAPLAN and OLNA. Matilda also supported students to prepare for the OLNA in her high school library which was also a community library, focusing on cognitive and attentional stamina as explored below.

...it's really just heaps of OLNA practice. So, I've been talking to the kids about having to sit for 50 minutes, because that's what you do in OLNA. You don't get up and go to the toilet, or you don't go and get a drink, you actually sit there and concentrate, and it's all about getting the mindset and practicing and practicing, and then you'll get quicker and quicker. I said if you sit OLNA once, you know that's quite a lot to take on, and then you don't sit it again for another six months, you really need to practice in between, and this package is really good for that.

Teacher librarians can help to make the process of undertaking high-stakes literacy testing less stressful for students by facilitating practice in similar environments, using comparable testing programmes to build confidence and ideally proficiency.

Conclusions

Clearly, teacher librarians may play an important role in improving the reading engagement and subsequent literacy outcomes of struggling readers. This paper finds that teacher librarians may play multifaceted roles in providing targeted support for struggling readers by identifying them, providing them with age and skill-appropriate materials, undertaking skill scaffolding supporting choice, supporting students with special needs, providing one-to-one matching, promoting access to books, enhancing the social position of books and reading, reading aloud to students, facilitating silent reading, and preparing students for high-stakes literacy testing.

One concern that I have in presenting these findings in this manner is the likelihood that these practices subsequently comprise a checklist for best practice in supporting struggling readers in school libraries. Unfortunately, in a number of the libraries that took part in the study, funds and staffing had been depleted to the point that to continue to perform practices to support literacy and literature learning was becoming increasingly challenging for teacher librarians. Enacting all of these practices as part of regular work with struggling readers is realistic only if sufficient time is available to librarians in schools, and if they are given sufficient access to the students, which was another emergent concern.

In light of the aforementioned staffing and funding cuts faced by the profession, it is important that research seeks to make visible the educative contribution of librarians in schools in a timely manner. The first hurdle to making this work a research priority lies in the low valuing of the profession in schools (as explored in Merga *in press-b*), and poor

appetite to explore this area in academic research. Phillips and Paatsch (2011) note that “few literacy articles, policies or curricula in Australia mention school libraries. Teacher librarians have become virtually invisible in the literature and guidelines on literacy. Their work, absorbed into successful resource-based teaching and project-based learning, is invisible” (31). Similarly, an Australian Government inquiry into school libraries stated that “it is indisputable that the value of teacher librarians’ work has been eroded over the years and undervalued by many in the community, be it by colleagues, principals, parents or those in the wider school community” (House of Representatives (HOR), 2011, 117). The findings explored in this paper can provide a basis for further research to explore the contribution to English education that librarians in schools make across diverse geographic contexts, so that this educative role is better understood, and the generalisability of the practices can be explored.

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Notes on contributor

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